

Ask *the* Expert

Back To School - Healthy Eating

As my child goes back to school after being at home all summer, how can I make sure they continue to make healthy choices at lunch time?

School can be full of unhealthy choices for your child, sending them off with a healthy breakfast in their stomach is the first step to success. Sugary cereals, donuts and toaster pastries, for example, start a child's day with an abundance of sugar. Sugar provides fast energy that leaves the body almost as quickly as it came in; leaving your child hungrier and wanting more sugar. The last thing you want to do is begin your child's day this way. Provide a breakfast that includes a protein source, such as eggs, a grain source, such as whole wheat bread and a fruit source, such as a banana. This meal will give your child the long-lasting energy they need to make smarter choices at lunch time. If they are void of energy, they will grab the highest sugar/fat items they can find.

The schools have made great strides in providing healthier lunch options for our children but, to truly control what they eat, sending them with a lunch is the best option. Pack them a bottle of water along with their favorite sugar-free drink flavoring such as Crystal Light or Mio, if your child doesn't drink enough water. Make their lunches fun and enticing by using cookie cutters to create shapes out of their sandwiches or by making homemade lunchables out of whole wheat Ritz crackers, non-fat cheese and low-sodium turkey meat. If they like eating from the cafeteria, try limiting it by looking at the menus available in Sunday's paper and only paying for the healthier options. Talk to them about choosing white milk throughout the week and, perhaps, saving chocolate milk as a treat for Friday. Sometimes comprising may be the best option for a better end result.

What resources would you recommend to help teach my child about a healthy lifestyle?

The very best resource is your family physician. Always make sure you contact them with any questions or concerns you may have about your child. A secondary resource is the internet. It is filled with many valuable resources. Always make sure that you are receiving your information from a reputable source, however. Look for websites that end in .org, .edu or .gov. These sites will contain research-based recommendations. The USDA website provides resource materials for parents, teachers and children. There are many great videos and songs on there that the children will enjoy. There is also a wonderful magazine that I hand out to the children at Center for Healthy Children called Chop Chop. This magazine gives great tips on staying healthy and provides many child-friendly recipes.

I need help with ideas for easy after school snacks, kids can prepare.

Any snack that you choose for your child should be in the caloric range of 150 -200; with younger children being closer to the 150 range. Some snacks that have been wildly popular at Center for Healthy Children are as follows: spread nonfat cream cheese on top of a reduced fat Nilla wafer and top with ½ strawberry. Banana pops – cut a banana in fourths, spread natural peanut butter on the banana, roll in crushed graham crackers and push a pretzel stick into the banana to create a handle. Freezing grapes adds a new dimension to them and makes your child feel like they are eating a Popsicle. Fruit dipped in nonfat Greek vanilla yogurt is another favorite.

What can I do if my child is a picky eater?

"Picky eaters" can be a challenge but, with some creativity and determination, unhealthy eating habits can be changed. Ultimately, children like to feel empowered. They are told what to do

all day long so, by giving them the power to make an option, you are more likely to achieve success. Most children know that eating their vegetables is important and that they don't really have the option of not eating them but allowing them the choice of vegetable can make them feel like they have a say in what they're eating. Provide them with a couple of different vegetables to serve at dinner and let them choose which one they want to eat.

You can also engage them in the dinner making process. Have them help you with the menu, pick out the items and cook it. They are more likely to eat what they've helped cook.

Did you know that it takes 15-20 tries before a person can truly decide whether or not they like something? Encourage them to at least try it and to keep trying it; they may find, eventually, that they like it.

One of the latest trends is "sneaking" healthy food into a child's diet; of which I am not a fan. If they don't get used to seeing the food exactly how it's supposed to look when they're young, they will not eat it as an adult. The goal is to create life-long habits, not to trick them into eating something good for them.

Children love to use their fingers to dip their foods, try giving them their favorite dip to go with the food in question. For example, if they won't eat anything but chicken nuggets, try cutting up baked chicken and serving with their favorite dip like ranch or BBQ sauce. Let them dip it just as they would chicken nuggets. If they won't eat broccoli, try making some cheese dip to go with it. It may take some imagination on your part but if you prepare the food in a way that they will enjoy the process, they are more likely to eat it.

What resources are available if my child is obese or if I think they may be headed down that path?

As I've mentioned before, your family physician is always the first stop and is the very best resource if you are concerned about

your child's health. If you find that your child needs additional help, Center for Healthy Children offers several programs throughout the year to teach children that being active and eating healthy is fun. Keeping them active can be challenging so look at getting them enrolled in local sports teams.

My child will be participating in after school sports – what do you recommend for snacks and fueling up before practice and games?

First and foremost, stay away from sports drinks. They are full of salt and sugar. This is one of the biggest mistakes I see parents make. These drinks are promoted as a "sports drink" and are typically thought of as a "healthy option." This is far from the case. These drinks are made for athletes that are doing intense exercise for hours on end. After-school sports should only require water. Fruits are an excellent choice because they contain carbohydrates for energy and water for re-hydration. Be sure to provide a protein source for lasting energy such as nuts, yogurt, string cheese, peanut butter.

Because of my child's after school activities, the entire family gets home late. How can I provide a quick and healthy meal late in the evening?

Crockpot meals are great! They typically contain the entire meal and are cooked throughout the day. Another option is to make ahead and freeze. If you are planning to make your meal that evening, keep them simple (i.e. baked chicken, black beans and broccoli.) Simple meals are quick and easy when you are tired. Defrosted chicken breasts take about ½ hour to bake in the oven. By the time you open the can of black beans, take the broccoli out of the freezer, cook them both and set the table, the chicken will be just about finished. Be sure to plan all your meals for the entire week. If you know exactly what you're going to make when you get home, it's easier than trying to figure out where to go to eat or what to fix.



Jennifer Martinez
Wellness Program Manager

NEA BAPTIST 
CLINIC

Building Health Care Around You